

SLOVENIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs in public and private. It states all religious communities shall enjoy equal rights and prohibits incitement of religious hatred or intolerance. The World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and Ministry of Justice (MOJ) continued a joint research project to establish the scope of Jewish heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. The report from the project was under review at year's end. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law on property nationalization claims that generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945. Muslims continued to ask the government to provide pork-free meals in public institutions. Muslim groups again reported difficulties in receiving services in hospitals, prisons, and the military. A government response to the Muslim community's request to reserve special areas in cemeteries for Muslim graves and allow gravestones to face Mecca remained under review. An ecumenical group of churches and the Islamic Community of Slovenia helped the government devise a COVID-19 assistance package for religious communities in November. Most Muslim religious workers, however, were not eligible for this assistance because they were not citizens of the country.

Muslim groups reported obstacles in accessing halal food and spiritual care, and in circumcising their male children. The Islamic Community opened the country's first mosque on February 7 in a limited capacity, although it was closed most of the year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Secretary-General of the Islamic Community Nevzet Poric stated that anti-Muslim hate speech was present on social media.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials responsible for upholding religious freedom, including the Ministry of Culture (MOC) Office for Religious Communities, to discuss the ongoing concerns of religious groups regarding the legal requirement to stun animals before slaughter, the opinion of the human rights ombudsman that circumcision of male children is not permissible for nonmedical reasons, and the state of interfaith dialogue. In September, a senior U.S. official urged the MOJ Higher Secretary to demonstrate the country's commitment to Holocaust survivors and take steps to revitalize Jewish life in the country. During the year, embassy officials organized a roundtable with local university representatives and the head of the World Religions Program at Ljubljana University to discuss issues related to religious freedom, and organized Zero Discrimination Day, which featured remarks at the embassy by a representative of

the Islamic Community on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy amplified its engagement on religious freedom issues through social media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Estimates of the Catholic community's size range from one million to 1.5 million persons. According to the secretary-general of the Islamic Community, the Muslim population is approximately 100,000. Estimates of the Serbian Orthodox Church community's size range from 30,000 to 45,000 persons. The head of the Protestant community estimates its size at 10,000 persons. The Buddhist community, made up mostly of ethnic Slovenians, is estimated to number 2,000 persons. The Jewish community estimates its size at 300 persons. The Orthodox and Muslim communities include a large number of immigrants from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A number of refugees and immigrants, including foreign workers, are part of the Muslim community. There are also small communities of adherents of Slavic pagan religions, also known as Slavic Native Faiths.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their beliefs in public and private. It declares all religious communities shall have equal rights and provides for the separation of religion and state. The constitution affords equal human rights and fundamental freedoms to all individuals irrespective of their religion; it also prohibits incitement of religious discrimination and inflammation of religious hatred and intolerance. The constitution recognizes the right of conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons.

The law states individuals have the right to freely select a religion; freedom of religious expression (or rejection of expression); to express – alone or in a group, privately or publicly – their religious beliefs freely in “church or other religious communities,” through education, religious ceremonies, or in other ways; and not to be forced to become a member or to remain a member of a religious group, nor to attend (or not attend) worship services or religious ceremonies. The law stipulates the right to refuse to comply with legal duties and requirements that

contradict an individual's religious beliefs, provided such refusals do not limit the rights and freedoms of other persons.

The law enables churches and other religious communities to register with the government to obtain status as officially recognized religious entities, but it does not restrict the religious activities of unregistered religious groups. Unregistered religious groups may establish legal associations or entities to purchase property and are required to pay taxes on such property, whereas property owned by registered religious groups used for religious purposes is exempt from taxation. According to the law, the rights of registered and unregistered religious groups include autonomy in selecting their legal form and constituency; freedom to define their internal organization and name and define the competencies of their employees; autonomy in defining the rights and obligations of their members; latitude to participate in interconfessional organizations within the country or abroad; and freedom to construct buildings for religious purposes. Registered religious groups may provide religious services to military, police, prisons, hospitals, and social care institutions. Registered religious groups are also eligible for rebates on value-added taxes and government cofinancing of social security contributions for their religious workers. The law states religious groups have a responsibility to respect the constitution and the legal provisions on nondiscrimination.

To register with the government, a religious group must submit an application to the MOC providing proof it has at least 10 adult members who are citizens or permanent residents; the name of the group, which must be clearly distinguishable from the names of other religious groups; the group's address in the country; and a copy of its official seal to be used in legal transactions. It must pay an administrative tax of 22.60 euros (\$28). The group must also provide the names of the group's representatives in the country, a description of the foundations of the group's religious beliefs, and a copy of its organizational act. If a group wishes to apply for government cosponsorship of social security for clergy members, it must show it has at least 1,000 members for every clergy member.

There are 54 registered religious groups, the largest of which are the Catholic Church, Islamic Community of Slovenia, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Evangelical Church.

The government may refuse the registration of a religious group only if the group does not provide the required application materials in full or if the MOC

determines the group is a “hate group” – an organization engaging in hate crimes, as defined by the penal code.

By law, the MOC’s Office for Religious Communities monitors and maintains records on registered religious communities and provides legal expertise and assistance to religious organizations. The MOC establishes and manages the procedures for registration, issues documents related to the legal status of registered communities, distributes funds allocated in the government’s budget for religious activities, organizes discussions and gatherings of religious communities to address religious freedom concerns, and provides information to religious groups on the legal provisions and regulations related to their activities.

In accordance with the law, citizens may apply for the return of property nationalized between 1945 and 1963. The government may provide monetary compensation to former owners who cannot receive restitution in kind; for example, it may authorize monetary compensation if government institutions are using the property for an official purpose or public service such as education or healthcare.

According to the constitution, parents have the right to provide their children with a religious upbringing in accordance with the parents’ beliefs. The government requires all public schools to include education on world religions in their curricula, with instruction provided by a school’s regular teachers. The government allows churches and religious groups to provide religious instruction in their faiths in public schools and preschools on a voluntary basis outside of school hours. The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools as part of the curriculum or during school hours but does not prescribe penalties for violations. Private schools may offer religious classes during or after school hours.

The law mandates Holocaust education in schools. This instruction focuses on the history of the Holocaust inside and outside the country. Schools use a booklet published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Holocaust education curriculum to create awareness of the history of Jews and anti-Semitism in Europe before World War II and of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. The booklet emphasizes the responsibility of everyone to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

The constitution provides for an independent human rights ombudsman to investigate and report on alleged human rights violations by the government, including those involving religious freedom. The President nominates and the

national assembly appoints the human rights ombudsman and allocates the office's budget, but otherwise the ombudsman operates independently of the government. Individuals have the right to file complaints with the ombudsman to seek administrative relief regarding abuses of religious freedom committed by national or local authorities, but appellants must exhaust all regular and extraordinary legal remedies before turning to the ombudsman. The ombudsman's office may forward these complaints to the State Prosecutor's Office, which may then issue indictments, call for further investigation, or submit the claims directly to a court, whereupon the complaints become formal. The ombudsman also submits an annual human rights report to the national assembly and provides recommendations and expert advice to the government.

The law allows for circumcision, but a nonbinding opinion by the human rights ombudsman states that based on the constitution and the law, "Circumcision for nonmedical reasons is not permissible and constitutes unlawful interference with the child's body, thereby violating his rights." Some hospitals do not offer circumcision because of this opinion.

The law requires that animals be stunned prior to slaughter.

The penal code's definition of hate crimes includes publicly provoking religious hatred and diminishing the significance of the Holocaust. Punishment for these offenses is imprisonment of up to two years, or, if the crime involves coercion or endangerment of security – defined as a serious threat to life and limb, desecration, or damage to property – imprisonment for up to five years. If officials abuse the power of their positions to commit these offenses, they may be subject to imprisonment of up to five years. Members of groups that engage in these activities in an organized and premeditated fashion – hate groups, according to the law – may also receive a punishment of up to five years in prison.

The law on hate speech prohibits the incitement to hatred, violence, and intolerance based on religion and on a number of other factors in a way that could threaten or disrupt public order.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The WJRO and Ministry of Justice continued a joint research project to determine the scope and financial value of heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their

collaborators. The report was under review by WJRO at year's end, with completion expected in 2021. The MOJ stated from the outset that the report would produce a limited number of cases of heirless property in the country. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law on property nationalization claims that generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945.

According to *The Jewish Telegraph Agency*, in January, the Supreme Court of Slovenia voided the 1946 treason conviction of Nazi collaborator Leon Rupnik, who was executed in Yugoslavia shortly after World War II. The court ordered a retrial for Rupnik, which is permitted under the law, stating that the trial and judiciary under Communist rule had been unjust. The director of the Jewish Cultural Center in Ljubljana wrote in a statement, "We were shocked and deeply concerned to learn about the decision."

A 2019 request to the government by the Muslim community to reserve special locations in cemeteries for graves of Muslims and allow gravestones to face Mecca remained under review at year's end. The central government delegated the review to local governments. In 2019, the Muslim community also requested the government make pork-free meals readily available in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other public institutions. The secretary general of the Islamic Community said all these issues remained unresolved at year's end.

Some minority religious communities continued to experience difficulties providing spiritual care to their members in the military, hospitals, and other public institutions. While many hospitals had Catholic chapels, members of other faiths had fewer opportunities to attend collective religious services while hospitalized. The armed forces (SAF) employed full-time Catholic and Protestant clergy to provide religious services but no Muslim imams, Orthodox priests, or Jewish rabbis. While Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the SAF had access to their local religious communities while serving domestically, such opportunities were not always available during deployments or training abroad. The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the country, Reverend Aleksandar Obradovic, again attributed the SAF's lack of Orthodox clergy to low numbers of qualified Orthodox priests in the country rather than to inadequate government support. The Orthodox community said it was preparing two candidates for service as chaplains in the SAF by 2023. Muslim community leaders said the Ministry of Defense had not employed an imam in the SAF, despite their requests to do so. Catholic officials again said their request for the government to employ an ordained bishop in the

SAF to oversee the organization of Catholic chaplains in the military remained pending.

The Islamic Community continued to provide certificates to companies producing meat from stunned animals confirming the meat was halal. The Jewish community raised concerns about the law requiring stunning prior to slaughtering, stating this violated kosher laws, and continued to import kosher meat from neighboring countries. The government defended the law as necessary to comply with European Union (EU) regulations to prevent unnecessary suffering to animals. On December 17, the EU Court of Justice ruled that EU member states may impose a requirement to stun animals prior to slaughter and that such a requirement does not infringe on the rights of religious groups.

The Office for Religious Communities and leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities again said continuing confusion regarding the legal status of circumcision resulted in many hospitals not offering the procedure. As a result, some Muslims and Jews continued to have the procedure performed in Austria. Muslim and Jewish leaders objected to the human rights ombudsman's opinion that circumcision violated the rights of children, calling it religious discrimination.

On June 18, the government dismantled the Council for Dialogue on Religious Freedom, which had its last session in October 2017 after it cancelled a planned October 2019 session due to lack of interest among religious groups. The most active member, the Islamic Community, withdrew in 2019; its leaders stated they saw little benefit coming from the council. Formed in June 2015, the council operated under the auspices of the MOC Office for Religious Communities and was responsible for promoting transparency and explaining national and EU legislation pertinent to religious groups and encouraging dialogue on issues of concern among the country's religious communities.

The MOC registered the Samanadipa Forest Buddhist Hermitage and Children of Triglav, a Slavic pagan group, as official religious groups during the year.

The government included pandemic assistance to religious communities in a national stimulus package passed in November that provided 700 euros (\$860) a month to workers, including those from registered religious communities, from October to December. Several registered churches and religious communities proposed this solution, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community. In

practice, however, most Islamic Community workers were not eligible for this assistance because they were not citizens of the country. While some religious communities had not fully assessed the loss of donation income during the pandemic, the Catholic Church and Serbian Orthodox Church estimated losses at approximately 60 percent. Secretary-General Poric of the Islamic Community said the loss was bound to be “very high and will definitely have an impact on our future activities.”

President Borut Pahor and Human Rights Ombudsman Peter Svetina attended observances marking the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide, and Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Government officials stated the country supported the IHRA Working Definition of Anti-Semitism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On November 3, the Islamic Community publicly condemned the November 2 terrorist attack in Vienna, Austria carried out by a Muslim, and it expressed solidarity with, and condolences to, the victims and their families.

There were incidents of anti-Muslim hate speech, especially online, according to Web-Eye, an internet monitoring organization. In 2019 (latest data available), among the 773 reported cases of alleged hate speech, 23 percent expressed intolerance towards Muslims. Secretary-General Poric stated that COVID-19 and corresponding government-imposed restrictions reduced the opportunities for face-to-face interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, but anti-Muslim hate speech was still present on social media.

The Orthodox community’s only church remained in Ljubljana. Orthodox representatives continued efforts to build additional churches in Koper and Celje until the government imposed COVID-19 restrictions. Before the restrictions, the Orthodox community in Koper had held services at a local Catholic church, in keeping with the Catholic Church practice to routinely grant access for local Orthodox communities to host events and religious ceremonies

On February 7, the Islamic Community opened the country's first mosque in Ljubljana. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, however, the mosque remained closed at year's end. Mufti Nedžad Grabus of the Islamic Community stated that the mosque's opening would bring increased scrutiny and possible backlash against Muslims, adding he received anonymous death threats during the mosque's initial construction in 2014 and 2015.

Representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant communities continued to report productive relations among members of different religious groups, including active interfaith dialogues at workshops and conferences, including virtual events.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to meet with government officials responsible for religious freedom, including the MOC's Office for Religious Communities. In June, embassy officials met the director of that office to discuss the ongoing concerns of religious groups regarding the legal requirement to stun animals before slaughter, the opinion of the human rights ombudsman that circumcision of male children is not permissible for nonmedical reasons, and the state of interfaith dialogue.

In September, a senior Department of State official urged MOJ Higher Secretary Peter Pavlin to demonstrate the country's commitment to Holocaust survivors and to revitalize Jewish life. The U.S. official said the outcome of the joint MOJ-WJRO study should not be seen as a prerequisite for moving forward with other signs of support for the Jewish community, such as funds to support survivors, including individuals living outside of the country; those efforts could begin even before the joint project final report was released.

In January, embassy officials organized a roundtable with local university representatives and the head of the World Religions Program at Ljubljana University to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including interfaith dialogue, hate speech, and relations with the government. In March, the embassy organized Zero Discrimination Day, and a representative of the Islamic Community, speaking at the embassy, delivered remarks on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. On May 11, embassy staff met with the Director of the Jewish Cultural Center in Ljubljana to discuss possible government gestures toward the Jewish community, such as offering the community property that could serve as its headquarters and a venue for gatherings and ceremonies, as well as a

provision of funds to support Holocaust survivors. Also in May, embassy officials met with the Secretary General of the Islamic Community to discuss the opening of the country's first mosque

The embassy amplified its engagement through social media posts about its meetings with representatives of religious communities, as well through posts that highlighted key dates, such as the International Day of Religious Freedom in October.